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SENSITIVE
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STATE FOR EUR/UMB AND DRL/ILCSR
DOL FOR SMARLER

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TAGS: [EMIN](#) [ELAB](#) [EAID](#) [UP](#)
SUBJECT: DEEP IN A UKRAINIAN COAL MINE: CLOSER TO HELL THAN ANY
MAN SHOULD COME

REF: KYIV 3071

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED - NOT FOR INTERNET PUBLICATION

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Ukraine's coal mines remain dangerous and grueling workplaces for the miners who depend on them for their livelihood. Two recent accidents that included fatalities underscore the severity of the situation. Econoff visited one mine in eastern Ukraine and experienced first-hand the hellish conditions facing miners. Labor safety officials complain of a lack of funding for safety improvements, and the horrific 2007 disaster at the Zasyadko mine apparently has not resulted in any substantial changes in government policy. The USG Coal Mine Safety Program has helped Ukraine to move in the right direction in recent years by introducing safety-enhancing techniques at some mines, but much work remains to be done. End Summary.

¶2. (U) Econoff accompanied representatives of Partnership for Energy and Environmental Reform (PEER), which implements the Department of Labor Coal Mine Safety Program in Ukraine, to a series of meetings and site visits with GOU mine officials during the week of June 2. The PEER contingent included consultants Ronald Costlow and Clyde Turner, themselves former mine inspectors and mine rescue officials from the U.S. Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA).

No Policy Changes Following Recent Accidents...

¶3. (U) Econoff and PEER reps met with Mykola Maleev, head of the State Labor Safety Committee's regional office in Donetsk, in Ukraine's coal heartland, on June 4. Maleev said that investigators were still working to determine the cause of the May 23 accident at the Krasnolymska mine, which killed eleven and injured several more. Maleev noted that the GOU needed to conduct more research on the effects of mining at very deep levels (i.e. greater than 1000 meters), as Ukrainian mines tend to be significantly deeper than their American and other counterparts, and more accidents seem to occur at greater depths. (Note: The GOU very often blames accidents on "spontaneous outbursts" of gas and coal dust, a very uncommon phenomenon in the United States, and one which the Ukrainians attribute to the greater depths of their mines. End Note.)

¶4. (SBU) Econoff asked if there had been any changes in policy in the aftermath of the tragic disaster that killed over 100 miners at Donetsk's Zasyadko mine in November/December 2007 (reftel). Maleev said that the government's investigative commission had completed its conclusions on the accident and made a list of recommendations -- including changes to ventilation systems, limiting production, and meting out serious disciplinary measures -- but that no substantive policy changes had taken effect as of yet. Maleev also thanked the USG for

providing an expert to assist with that investigation.
(Comment: Despite hopes that the sheer immensity of the disaster, along with a new government coming to power, would shake up the corrupt and dangerous practices at many coal mines, nothing much seems to have changed. Yukhim Zvyahilsky, the Member of Parliament who has run Zasyadko for years, received little more than a slap on the wrist and is still in control of the mine. Econoff took note, however, that the picture of Zvyahilsky that had previously been prominently displayed on Maleev's wall had been tellingly removed. End Comment.)

...And another Serious Accident Occurs

15. (U) A powerful explosion rocked the Karl Marx mine in Yenakiyevo, Donetsk oblast, on June 8, just days after our departure from the region. Thirty seven miners were initially trapped underground, and there were even several injuries on the surface, as a fire ball from the explosion carried up the shaft. Rescue efforts continue, with two miners confirmed dead and twelve further miners still missing and feared dead.

16. (SBU) Marina Nikitina, spokeswoman for the State Labor Safety Committee's Donetsk office, told the press that the government had ordered the mine to cease operations on June 6 due to numerous violations of safety rules. Mine officials initially reported that the 37 miners underground were engaged only in repair work, not active mining, but subsequent media reports cited miners who claimed that management had in fact sent them to do mining work despite the closure order. (Comment: The miners' claim is bolstered by the size of the explosion, as it seems unlikely that methane would be released in such large

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volumes if mining was not taking place. End Comment.)

To the Gates of Hell

17. (U) Econoff visited the Bozhanova mine, in the Eastern Ukrainian town of Makyivka, on June 5 to examine conditions in person. Our journey began with a descent of 1,012 meters via the shaft elevator, followed by a hike to one of the mine's new development sites. While our hosts explained that this was the easiest workplace to reach, the trip took us about 75 minutes by foot over uneven terrain, with the last half hour or so in temperatures of over 100 degrees Fahrenheit. (Note: In contrast to those in the United States, Ukrainian mines generally lack underground transportation systems to ferry miners to work sites. Rail, where in place, is often used exclusively for cargo, not people. End Note.) When we commented that it was so hot it felt like a sauna, our hosts corrected us by saying it was more like a Russian "banya" (the preferred choice in Ukraine) because of the high humidity levels. At our destination, approximately 1,200 meters below the surface, we found a group of miners stripped of their clothing, in an effort to counter the high temperatures, and covered in dust, which is thrown thick into the air whenever the drill is put into use against the rock face.

18. (SBU) Econoff asked Vitaliy, the slender but muscular brigade leader working the drill, how they managed to work under such conditions; Vitaliy quipped that they were used to the heat and now often got the chills when on the surface. Vitaliy Nikonenko, the Acting Manager of Bozhanova, similarly reasoned that the miners simply got used to the conditions. Costlow and Turner, however, argued that the heat, because it would cause dehydration and fatigue, would undoubtedly be a factor in increased accidents and injuries. They noted that no American coal miners would be expected to work in such conditions and that heat was often considered a warning sign of poor ventilation.

19. (U) Comment: Econoff, who is somewhat younger than the average miner at Bozhanova (our hosts estimated the mean age would be in the late 30s), was seriously winded just by the trip

to the site and back, due to the difficult terrain and high temperatures. Had our visiting group done six hours of hard labor once there, as the miners of Bozhanova do every day, a rescue team may well have proven necessary. End Comment

Lack of Funding for Labor Safety

¶10. (SBU) Anatoliy Ivanenko, head of the local mine inspectors based in Makyivka and one of our guides, pointed along the way to a half-constructed piece of machinery that, once operational, would apparently significantly cool that area of the mine. The cooling system required a whole network of pipes, costing upwards of a million dollars, however, and the funding was simply not available, said Ivanenko. (Comment: During several discussions, it was clear that funds, which come from the state budget and from "intermediary" companies that have stepped in to help cash-stripped mines, but in return gain control of their coal sales, are generally available only for activities with a direct link to production. Whenever a worker safety issue emerges, the answer usually seems to be, "There's no money." End Comment.) Ivanenko told us that, although thankfully there had not been any serious accidents of late, nearly 50 of the approximately 2,000 miners that work underground at Bozhanova had been injured during the last five months.

U.S. Assistance Targeting a Need

¶11. (U) Our recent visit to Ukraine's coal capital was a reminder of the very difficult working conditions facing the country's coal miners, and of the major steps needed to improve labor safety in this sector. Coal mining remains an important part of the economy and maintains a prominent position in the psyche of many Ukrainians, especially in eastern Ukrainian towns where the local mine is the largest employer and, in reality, the town's raison d'etre.

¶12. (U) The USG Coal Mine Safety Program has been effective in introducing Ukrainian mines to practical techniques that can quickly and easily improve safety conditions for workers. Although Ukraine regularly records the second-most number of coal mine fatalities in the world, there has been progress in

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recent years, and fatalities fell by 50% from a total of 316 in 2000 to 157 in 2005. Numbers have been up during the last two years (168 fatalities in 2006, 268 in 2007 largely due to the Zasyadko disaster), but we hope that the positive trend will continue. While we still await a sea change in the mentality of senior Ukrainian officials, our Coal Mine Safety Program is helping to chip away at the widespread neglect for mine safety with new, modern ideas.

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